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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated preservice teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement in an attempt to identify a source of or solution to the relatively low rates of parental involvement in formal preschool learning environments. Subjects were 271 undergraduate, early childhood teacher education majors. Demographic data supplemented measures of subjects' general attitudes toward parental involvement, perceptions of the impact of different types of parents, and attitudes toward five forms of parental involvement outlined by J. L. Epstein (1987): (1) basic obligations of parents, such as the building of positive home environments; (2) basic obligations of schools, such as communication with parents; (3) parent involvement at school, i.e., volunteer work in classrooms; (4) parent involvement in learning activities at home; and (5) parent involvement in governance and advocacy. Analyses indicated that although subjects held positive attitudes towards the five forms of parental involvement, they perceived themselves to be unprepared for implementing parental involvement strategies. Subjects with student teaching field experiences held significantly more positive attitudes than those without field experiences. Results are discussed in terms of implications for teacher education programs. (Author/RH)

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Preservice Teachers' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

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Runninghead: PRESERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate preservice teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement. Subjects were 271 undergraduate, early childhood teacher education majors. Measures of attitudes toward five specific forms of parental involvement outlined by Epstein were gathered. Analyses indicated that although subjects held positive attitudes toward each of the five forms of parental involvement, they perceived themselves to be unprepared for implementing parental involvement strategies. Subjects who had completed student teaching field experiences held significantly more positive attitudes than those without field experiences. Results are discussed in terms of implications for teacher education programs.

Preservice Teachers' Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement

Parents play a significant role in influencing their young children's development (Minuchin, 1987). The home atmosphere they provide and the interactions they engage in with their children creates an informal learning environment which impacts all aspects of their offspring's development. This influence lessens as children begin to make the transition from informal learning environments at home to the more formalized learning environments of school and group settings. Parents play an important part in making this transition from informal to formal types of learning less traumatic (Scott-Jones, 1988), and teachers are realizing more than ever that they must work in partnership with parents in bridging this gap (Rich, 1988).

Involving parents in the formalized learning process of school will allow the influence on their children's development to continue. Assuming an active parental role in the formal learning environment of school and group settings can have a positive impact on all aspects of the child's school performance (see Henderson, 1987 for a complete review). Increased parental involvement in these settings has been found to be related to increased positive parent-child interactions in the home environment as well (Epstein & Dauber, 1988). In order for children to obtain maximum benefits as they shift from informal to formal types of learning, educators and families must work together toward mutually supportive relations (Scott-Jones, 1988).

Many early childhood educators are at a loss in identifying ways to encourage parental involvement in the formalized learning environments in which they work.

Teachers generally recognize the need for increased parental involvement (Rich, 1988), yet the amount of training they receive in this area is minimal (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Swick & McKnight, 1989). Chavkin and Williams (1988) report that, of the 575 teacher educators surveyed as part of their large study on parent involvement practices, only 4% reported having taught a complete course on parent involvement, 15% reported providing part of a course on parent involvement, and 37% reported having taught only one class period on the topic.

This lack of preparation in parental involvement strategies may lead to negative attitudes and feelings of frustrations as early childhood educators are confronted with the need to involve parents in their children's education. These negative attitudes may limit teachers' abilities or desires to create successful parental involvement components for their classrooms. Teachers attitudes have been found to be significantly related to whether or not they implement parental involvement strategies (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1988; Swick & McKnight, 1989). Those teachers who hold more favorable attitudes toward parental involvement are more likely to be utilizing parental involvement techniques as part of their overall teaching approach.

Swick and McKnight (1989) have identified a set of essential characteristics of early childhood educators who are successful in encouraging parental involvement in their classrooms, including: (a) positive attitudes toward parents and the parental involvement process; and (b) knowledge and skills for enacting parental involvement activities. They report that those teachers who have more positive attitudes toward parental involvement processes also tend to be the ones who have greater levels of

participation in parent involvement activities in their classrooms. The work of Epstein and others has been instrumental in identifying this link between teacher attitudes and parental involvement practices, yet little work has been done in examining how these attitudes are formulated.

The purpose of this study was to explore preservice teachers' attitudes towards varying types of parental involvement. Although parental involvement practices have been shown to be effective in increasing student performance, the number of teachers who actively utilize strategies to encourage such involvement is low (Epstein, 1986; Swick & McKnight, 1989). This study is an attempt to identify a possible source (or solution) to the relative low rates of parental involvement in formal learning environments. Examining attitudes toward parental involvement practices during the early stages of teacher preparation/careers may shed some light as to how these attitudes are formed. Findings from this study can guide educators as they attempt to devise methods to encourage mutually supportive relationships with parents which can bridge the gap between the informal and formal learning environments for young children.

For the purpose of this investigation, parent involvement was defined in terms of Epstein's (1987) model of parental involvement strategies. This typology breaks down the concept of parent involvement into five categories: Type 1 - Basic Obligations of Parents (i.e., building positive home environments that support school learning and behavior); Type 2 - Basic Obligations of Schools (i.e., communicating with parents about school expectations, programs, and children's performance, etc.); Type 3 - Parent

Involvement at School (i.e., volunteering in classrooms, etc.); Type 4 - Parent Involvement in Learning Activities at Home; and Type 5 - Parent Involvement in Governance and Advocacy (i.e., advisory councils, PTA/PTO, etc.). Previous work by Epstein and others (Epstein & Dauber, 1988) suggests this model may be hierarchial in nature as schools develop comprehensive parent involvement programs.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for the study were 271 undergraduate early childhood teacher education majors from a large university in the southeast. Mean age for the students was 22.4 years with a majority (97.4%) being female. Eighty-nine subjects (32%) were completing their student teaching placements when the data were collected, while the rest were at various stages in their teacher education programs. Mean GPA for the subjects was 3.17 (on a 4.0 scale) with a range of 2.50 to 4.00.

Procedures

Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire during the spring quarter of the 1988-89 academic year. This questionnaire was an adapted version of an instrument developed by Epstein (Epstein & Dauber, 1988), and consisted of 83 items measuring attitudes toward different aspects of parental involvement, as well as open-ended questions and items for demographic and background information. Subjects completed

the questionnaire during course time allocated by class instructors for this purpose, or as part of a student teaching seminar they were attending.

Measures

Forty-nine of the items on the questionnaire were used to construct five scales measuring subjects' attitudes toward the five specific forms of parental involvement outlined in Epstein's (1987) model, plus a sixth scale measuring subjects' general attitudes toward parental involvement (see Table 1). The remaining 34 items were

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Insert Table 1 about here

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used to gather demographic information, as well as attitudes toward specific parental involvement activities and perception of the impact of different types of parents.

For the six scales constructed from the questionnaire, subjects were asked to respond using four-point likert items ranging from no emphasis to strong emphasis, or from not important to very important. Negatively and positively worded items were used to avoid generalized response patterns. Internal consistency for five of the six scales (including the General Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement scale) was high with Cronbach Alphas ranging from .65 to .86 (see Table 1). Consistency on the Type 5 scale was not as high with an Alpha of .47.

Results

Analyses of the data suggest the subjects held fairly positive attitudes toward each of the five types of parental involvement and toward parental involvement in general, with means on the six scales ranging from 3.27 to 3.72 (see Table 1). Subjects reported the strongest positive attitudes toward Type 2 involvement (Basic Obligations of Schools; $\underline{M}$ = 3.72), while their attitudes toward Type 3 involvement (Parent Involvement in Schools) was the lowest ($\underline{M}$ = 3.27).

In an attempt to identify background factors which may be related to attitudes toward parental involvement, correlations were computed between demographic variables and each of the six measures of attitudes toward parental involvement. Analyses revealed the students' GPA to be significantly related to Type 1 ($\underline{r}$ =.16, $\underline{p}$ < .01), Type 2 ($\underline{r}$ =.17, $\underline{p}$ < .01), and Type 3 ($\underline{r}$ =.18, $\underline{p}$ < .01) forms of parental involvement, with high GPA's being associated with more positive attitudes. Although these correlations were significant (all at $\underline{p}$ < .01), the strength of these relationships were relatively low. No other significant correlations between demographic variables and the six measures were revealed, thus suggesting that background characteristics were unrelated to the preservice teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement.

In gathering demographic information, subjects were asked to designate their age level preference for teaching, the number of parent involvement or home/school relationships courses they had completed, the number of courses attended that included at least one class session on parental involvement, and their perceived preparation to implement parental involvement strategies (four-point likert scale; not at all prepared

to very prepared). Although analyses indicated subjects felt they were minimally prepared to implement parental involvement strategies (M = 2.34), this perceived lack of preparation was unrelated to any of the six scales measuring attitudes toward parental involvement (r's = .04 to .13). Subjects' grade level preference for teaching was also unrelated to attitudes toward parental involvement (r's = -.12 to .01). Significant correlations were revealed between subjects' perceived preparation for parental involvement strategies and the number of parental involvement or home/school relationships courses completed (r = .26, p < .01) and class sessions attended on parental involvement (r = .30, p < .01). Those students who had completed parent involvement courses or attended sessions on the topic felt better prepared to use such strategies in their classroom.

To explore whether or not actual classroom experience would have an impact on attitudes toward parental involvement, a MANOVA function was applied to the data (see Table 2). Scores from measures of attitudes toward the five types of parental

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Insert Table 2 about here

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involvement along with the measure for general attitudes were entered as dependent variables, while student teaching vs. non-student teaching was entered as a factor. The multivariate F ($F(6,264)$ = 3.30, p = .004) suggested significant differences on these variables existed. Examinations of the univariate F's revealed significant differences in attitudes toward Type 1 ($F(1,269)$ = 17.21, p < .001), Type 2 ($F(1,269)$ = 6.68, p <

.01), Type 3 ($F(1,269) = 8.13$, $p < .01$), and Type 4 ($F(1,269) = 5.47$, $p < .05$) forms of involvement, with those in the student teaching group having greater scores on each variable. No significant differences were found on the Type 5 or General Attitudes scales. These findings suggest that, even though the undergraduate students hold a generally positive attitude toward parental involvement, once they were in the field working with children and their parents, their awareness of the importance of parental involvement became even greater.

As part of the questionnaire, subjects were asked to indicate the appropriateness of ten specific forms of parental involvement activities (Type 3 forms of involvement) using four-point likert scales (see Table 3). Responses indicated subjects viewed

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Insert Table 3 about here

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traditional forms of parental involvement, such as reading to children ($M = 3.45$), sharing careers or hobbies with them ($M = 3.63$), and helping on trips ($M = 3.76$), as most appropriate, while non-traditional forms, such as checking attendance ($M = 2.18$) or monitoring halls, cafeterias, etc. ($M = 2.42$), were viewed as being less appropriate.

Subjects were also asked to indicate their perceptions of the amount of influence specific types of parents can have on their children's development and school performance (see Table 4). Responses indicated subjects' traditional viewpoints on

Insert Table 4 about here

parental influences with mothers being seen as having more positive involvement than fathers (t=23.04, df=270, p<.0001), parents of younger children having more positive involvement than older (t=13.52, df=270, p<.001), and perceptions of less educated parents as having little positive involvement (M = 2.19).

At the end of the questionnaire subjects were asked to respond to two open-ended questions. Eighty-nine percent (244) of the subjects responded to these items. When asked to indicate their perceptions as to why very few in-service teachers utilize parental involvement techniques, two major themes became evident in responses. Thirty-three percent (80) of the respondents indicated that teachers had little knowledge or understanding of how to implement parental involvement strategies, while 28% (69) indicated that teachers did not have enough time to plan and implement these strategies. Other themes in responses to this item included: teachers are intimidated by parents (10%); a lack of interest on the part of parents (12%); lack of time on the part of parents (4%); teachers don't want untrained parents in their classrooms (5%); teacher loss of authority/control when parents are involved (3%); and other mixed responses (4%).

The second open-ended item asked subjects to indicate whether or not they felt teacher education programs should include a required course on parental involvement, elective courses on the topic, required class sessions on the topic in other courses, or

not address the topic at all on an undergraduate level, and their reasons behind their response. Seventy-six percent (185) of the respondents felt that a course on parental involvement should be required on an undergraduate level, while 20% (50) indicated that class sessions on the topic be required in some courses.

Discussion

Data collected for this study provide an indication as to how undergraduate early childhood teacher education majors view the topic of parental involvement. Previous research has suggested that the use of parental involvement strategies is low among in-service teachers, yet findings from this exploratory study indicate that preservice early childhood teachers have fairly positive attitudes toward this area. Although these findings present an interesting question as to why in-service teachers fail to utilize parental involvement techniques (when on a preservice level they hold such positive attitudes), the results do point out some areas which educators and teacher education institutions can focus as they attempt to devise methods to encourage mutually supportive relationships between parents and teachers.

The results indicated these preservice teachers held highly favorable attitudes toward each of the five types of parental involvement outlined in Epstein's (1987) model. These favorable attitudes became even stronger when subjects had classroom experience through student teaching placements. Subjects held these favorable attitudes in spite of their perceived lack of preparation in the area of parental involvement strategies. In contrast to previous research, these favorable attitudes

remained strong across grade level preference for teaching as well (i.e., no significant correlation between grade level preference for teaching and attitudes toward parental involvement). An interesting question then becomes what happens to preservice teachers as they enter the field that prevents these positive attitudes from becoming actualized in parental involvement strategies being used in their classrooms.

The results of this study provides an indication as to one possible source of this problem. Subjects perceived themselves to have little preparation for implementing parent involvement strategies, with a majority not having had a course on parent involvement (78%) or more than one class session on the topic (59%). A large number (33%) also viewed this lack of preparation as being the major reason why in-service teachers fail to utilize parent involvement techniques. These findings coincide with the work of Williams and Chavkin (1989) and others (Greenberg, 1989; Swick & McKnight, 1989) outlining teacher training as being an essential element in successful parent involvement programs. If preservice teachers are expected to maintain these favorable attitudes as they enter the field, they must be provided with the training that will allow them to successfully implement parent involvement strategies. The findings from this study indicated those subjects who had completed courses on parental involvement perceived themselves as being better prepared to implement parental involvement techniques.

This perceived lack of preparation may also be a reason why subjects responded in traditional ways when indicating the appropriateness of specific forms of parental involvement, and in their perceptions of the amount of influence specific types of

parents have on their children (see Tables 3 and 4). The traditional view of parent involvement has the mother volunteering to help out on field trips or in the classrooms. This traditional viewpoint also sees mothers as opposed to fathers, educated as opposed to less educated, and parents of younger as opposed to older children as having the greatest amount of influence through parental involvement. These traditional viewpoints have limited the ability of many parents (and teachers) from taking an active and mutually supportive role in the education of young children. Epstein's (1987) model is an attempt to move educators away from this stereotypical thinking about parental involvement. This framework provides educators with a view of parental involvement that would allow all parents to assume a more active role in their children's education, regardless of their background. Subjects in this study have not been trained in this model of parental involvement so as to allow their understanding of the concept to coincide with these positive attitudes.

An overwhelming majority (76%) of the subjects indicated that a course on parental involvement strategies should be a required component of early childhood teacher education programs. Due to the importance of this topic, those involved in early childhood teacher preparation should evaluate the emphasis on parental involvement within their programs. Alternatives should be explored to develop ways to stress early on to undergraduates the importance of parental involvement, as well as to provide them with the necessary skills that will allow them to successfully implement parental involvement techniques.

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Table 1

Scale Variables

Scale	Definition[a]	Number of Items	M	SD	Alpha
Type 1	Basic Obligations of Parents	12	3.49	.32	.80
Type 2	Basic Obligations of Schools	8	3.72	.28	.69
Type 3	Parent Involvement in the Schools	5	3.27	.45	.69
Type 4	Parent Involvement in Learning Activities at Home	13	3.41	.38	.86
Type 5	Parent Involvement in Decision Making Roles	2	3.45	.52	.47
Type 6	General Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement	9	3.31	.30	.65

Note.
[a]based on Epstein's model of parental involvement.

Table 2

Attitudes Toward Parental Involvement by Student Teaching Status

Variables	Student Teaching[a] M	SD	Non-Student Teaching[b] M	SD	MANOVA Wilkes Crit.	F	df	p	ANOVA[c] F	p
					.9302	3.30	6,264	.004		
General	3.34	.29	3.29	.30					2.27	.130
Type 1	3.60	.30	3.43	.32					17.21	.000
Type 2	3.78	.25	3.69	.29					6.68	.010
Type 3	3.38	.45	3.22	.45					8.13	.005
Type 4	3.49	.35	3.37	.38					5.47	.020
Type 5	3.48	.58	3.43	.49					.54	.464

Note.

[a]n = 89

[b]n = 182

[c]df = 1,269

Table 3

Perceived Appropriateness of Specific Parental Involvement Activities[a]

Parental Involvement Activity	M	SD
listen to children read aloud	3.18	.88
read to children	3.45	.76
tutor children in specific skills	3.17	.84
help on trips or parties	3.76	.54
give talks (e.g., careers, hobbies, etc.)	3.63	.61
monitor halls, cafeteria, or other areas	2.42	1.05
work in library, computer lab, or other area	2.96	.85
teach enrichment or other lessons	2.51	.97
check attendance	2.18	1.12
work in parent room	3.27	.76

Note.

[a]based on 4-point likert scale

1 = note appropriate

2 = somewhat appropriate

3 = appropriate

4 = definitely appropriate

Table 4

Perceptions of Parental Influence[a]

Type of Parent	M	SD
working parents	2.78	.54
less educated parents	2.19	.62
parents of older children	2.73	.68
parents of young children	3.45	.60
single parents	2.70	.60
young parents	3.05	.76
parents of transfer students	3.13	.67
fathers	2.59	.68
mothers	3.56	.52
other adults whom the child lives with	3.49	.68

Note.

[a]based on 4-point likert scale

1 = no involvement of any kind

2 = little positive involvement

3 = some positive involvement

4 = much positive involvement